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ABSTRACT

Composition assignments for elementary and secondary school students should be varied according to the size and scope of the assignment, the size of the composition group, and the degree of help and encouragement required by each student. Writing should not be regarded as punishment, but rather should be designed to provide an optimum level of success. A continuum involving polar opposites such as practical--non-practical, personal--non-personnal, creative--non-creative, fiction--non--fiction, literal--non-literal, and so on, may be useful in describing students' writing or in making writing assignments. Tailoring the writing experience and providing an evaluative framework for each student results in better understanding of tasks, more accurate self-evaluation, and therefore improved writing confidence and self-concept. (KS)

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Atlanta, March 5, 1976

LANGUAGE ARTS AND THE BICENNTENIAL: SUMMONS, OPPORTUNITY & CHALLENGE OF THE FUTURE

(Eighth Annual Conference on the Language Arts-)

Self Concept and Self Evaluation

"Writing: Strands and Strategies for Describing, Prescribing and Evaluating the Task."

Paper Read

March 5, 1976

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Part of the conference theme is "Summons, Opportunity and Challenge of the Future." I hope, that the ideas expressed in this paper will encourage those who are already doing what I suggest, push into action those who agree but haven't yet put them into practice and challenge those in opposition to rethink their position. The future holds good things for all of us if we will listen to the past and present as we make plans to convert the future into NOW. "NOW" is all we really have; it is all we'll ever have; it is all we ever need. It is that rare moment in which we live caught forever between the past and the future. Believe in NOW, believe in yourself and your unique ability to challenge and change as well as select and save. Challenge and change the ineffectual things; select and save the effectual things of NOW.

Begin this moment to evaluate yourself and your role in the world. Consider who you are and where you are. Consider who it will be and where they will be in 2176. Return to NOW. How you evaluate and how you think of yourself will determine what you do. IT IS NO DIFFERENT WITH CHILDREN.

Let your next several thoughts be directed toward WRITING. Not handwriting but written communication. Explore with me some familiar and perhaps some new strands and strategies for describing, prescribing, and evaluating the writing task. To the extent teachers understand it and feel comfortable about it, so will the pupils.

Two hundred years ago (give or take a few years) when I was a bib-overalled elementary school pupil, composition was a much dreaded task. Dreaded for several reasons.

1. It was used often as punishment (I will not run in the halls.)
2. I didn't know what I was supposed to do, how to do it nor if I'd done it well.
3. I was convinced that I could not write well (some of you may be similarly inclined at this point).

You are hereby summoned and challenged with an opportunity to create in <u>your</u> pupils something different. That something different is an enjoyment of writing and an understanding of how it may be accomplished as well as a positive feeling about having the ability to do it effectively.

Writing will never be fun if it is also punishment. STOP THIS DESPICABLE PRACTICE, IF YOU CAN. Make the misbehavers "science," "math," "social studies" or "health" 100 times; but don't make them "write" as punishment.

Share with your students the parts of the whole and the many ways to patiently accomplish them. For examples: I was usually asked to "to write a story" or "write a poem" or "write a composition" without much assistance, direction or prescription to aid in the task. Normally I was reminded to "be sure and do it by myself", "make it original" and "have it completed in 30 minutes".

Let us begin wih the time strategy first - Lownefeld talks of sensitivity as a part of the creative process from which fluency (lots of ideas) flexibility (varieties of ideas) and redefinition (changing the known) develop. Markeberry stresses preparation and incubation as forerunners of the end product and evaluation. Some pupils come to the task with idea reserves, many are "overdrawn" or have "insufficient funds available." For those lacking ideas, motivations and experiences, help must be available. Motivating situations can be brought into the pupils; or they might need to go to another setting; they may be helped in "releasing" or "using" something already in their heads. Hundred of motivations, ideas, & story starters are available; our concern here is how to help pupils use them.

Strickland puts it nicely when she suggests that the stages of writing should include:

Dictation

Dictation with copying

Writing with all the help needed

Writing independently

We all expect to take dictation from pre-schoolers & kindergarteners. We sometimes fail to realize that many 4th - 7th - 9th graders, high schoolers and college students could "get started," develop confidence in at least the ability to compose and perhaps later move on into to more complete mastery of the writing skills if they could dictate their messages. (Do you ever use a dictaphone & leave the "writing" to a secretary? -- Same principle). Why hurry the child to independence in a feeling of inadequacy toward self's ability to write? HELP HIM!

Although I remember occassionally getting to study spelling with a friend or work math with a friend. I never recall being allowed to write with a friend. Why? Why? Why do we take away all evidence of the audience when we ask students to write? Very often two heads are better than one. Why must one always scrounge for help alone when another being might be the real spark for movement? How many ways could a class of 30 be "divided up." Hundreds! -- Why then must one always work alone. Try any number & any combination of pupils from the whole class to individuals. I personally am sold on working in pairs with intermediate aged pupils. Suit yourself but occassionally do it differently.

Vary the size of the assignments. Sentence completions are fun & often offer the possibility of success to some who would otherwise be doomed to failure. All the items below are appropriate for accomplished writers. Some may be impossible for the unaccomplished.

Sentence Completion

Sentence Composition

Paragraph Completion

Paragraph Composition

Multi-paragraph Completion

Multi-paragraph Composition

Let the pupil begin where {he / she} can be successful if it is not possible for {him / her} to accomplish all these tasks. Even though some are able to do all the tasks, occassional vary them so that boredom may be avoided.

Give the pupils an idea of how to analyze the task so that they know what decisions need to be a part of their task. Prescription poetry such as cinquain, diamonte, and limmericks are great at this. They prescribe line by line what to do. (Recently a college senior in one of my language arts methods classes came up to me and said, I've done it", "By George, I believe I've done it" (edited for inclusion) "Done what?" I inquired. "I've written a poem; I've never done it before AND I didn't believe I could do it." But she <u>had</u> done it, you can do it AND SO CAN YOUR PUPILS when they know what it is that they are supposed to do. She had begun by being successful with cinquain; this success hurled her into many other poetry forms.

Help pupils analyze storyhood (to find that they need: characters, a setting, a plot etc..). Then help them be fluent and flexible and thereby come up with possible characters, settings, plots, etc. and from the possibilities encourage them to select the ones they want to utilize.

Below are factors which must be dealt with everytime someone composes. Help the pupils realize what the decisions are AND then they will have confidence in their ability to make them. These factors are relevant to nearly all types of composition.

Given any task, the speaker or the writer (as well as the listener or the reader) should find this profile to be a helpful framework for categorizing the medium and the message:

PRACTICAL_____NON-PRACTICAL

PERSONAL_____NON-PERSONAL

CREATIVE_____NON-CREATIVE

FICTION_____NON-FICTION

OBJECTIVE_____NON-OBJECTIVE

THERAPEUTIC_____NON-THERAPEUTIC

ORNATE_____NON-ORNATE

FORMAL_____NON-FORMAL

HUMOROUS_____NON-HUMOROUS

SHORT_____NON-SHOPT

POETIC_____NON-POETIC

DIRECT_____NON-DIRECT

LITERAL_____NON-LITERAL

OFFENSIVE_____NON-OFFENSIVE

The "NON" end of the continuum is so labled to provide a maximum of contrast with a minimum of vocabulary confusion. The continuum concept provides for polarization in either direction (on all factor sets) as well as the neutralizing or compromizing of the two extremes. This seems most appropriate since extremes are often forced and somewhat useless. Example: "Is 'X' composition creative?" seems less

helpful than indicating the amount of creativity apparent to the reader or prescribed by the "physician" (teacher).

The paragraphs which follow serve only to briefly define the terms introduced by the profile.

To what degree is the expression pragmatic, is the test for PRACTICALness or NON-PRACTICALness. The intended use may range from very essential or vital or polite (PRACTICAL) to superfluous or frivilious or wasted energy (NON-PRACTICAL).

A PERSONAL---NON-PERSONAL evaluation of the expression denotes the extent to which the self of the author is involved. Is the writer or speaker dealing with something that is first hand-first person (emotional or physical involvement) or is the writer's relationship one of detachment or vicariousness (NON-PERSONAL).

To establish the CREATIVE---NON-CREATIVE value of the expression, one asks to what extent the work is a verbatim, copied word for word, message or identical in form or format to any message or form known to the producer (Strickland). The best example of NON-CREATIVE work is plagarism of both the message and the form of expression; the epitome of CREATIVE work is content and format that is new or different to the writer. The extent to which the expression varies from a plagaristic form and/or content is the extent of its CREATIVITY. (It should be noted that too much creativity, newness or differentness, could make communication difficult though "it ain't necessarily so".)

The FICTION---NON-FICTION contrast serves to establish the degree to which the expression was or is to be viewed as "true" or "real" (NON-FICTION) as opposed to make-believe

(FICTION).

The intent of the OBJECTIVE---NON-OBJECTIVE category is to clarify the amount of emotion and subjectivity involved in the expression. Is the account one that states opinions, editorializes, hypothesizes, evaluates, or passes judgements (NON-OBJECTIVE); or is it prone to candid descriptions of givens (OBJECTIVE)?

Is the writing to any extent a problem solving tool? Does it in some way help the writer to clarify his thoughts, release his emotions or conquer his fears? To the extent that such happens (THERAPEUTIC) or doesn't happen (NON-THERAPEUTIC) the expression may be viewed as being THERAPEUTIC or NON-THERAPEUTIC.

ORNATE---NON-ORNATE is a characteristic set which indicates the extent to which colorful, figurative, decorative language is utilized to enshroud the ideas expressed.

The tone, mode, or level of sophistication of the expression is indicated on the FORMAL---NON-FORMAL scale. To what extent is the information in a form that one would label "text-book" perfect in content and form (FORMALness)?

HUMOR obviously relates to the degree of amusement derived from the product, i.e. Is it funny or is it solemn?

The length of the composition determines its evaluation as SHORT or NON-SHORT.

The distinction of what is and is not poetry is not an easy one yet the POETIC characteristics are either obviously present or lacking to some degree. Form and word choice, as well as, style and amount of emotion help influence this rating.

The DIRECTness with which something is stated is often tempered with tact. DIRECTness is often sacrificed in favor of adding supporting or explanatory information which may be viewed as padding which is helpful or wasted energy depending on the readers need for the additional information.

The absoluteness of meaning (LITERAL) as opposed to figurative meaning (NON-LITERAL) should be indicated by the LITERAL continuum. Was it actually "9 feet" tall or was it merely taller than average?

OFFENSIVE reflects whether or not the tone of the material was one which would anger a reader. If the one reading is likely to be upset, then the composition is evaluated as left of center in terms of OFFENSIVEness.

Consider the following example of a writing situation and the resulting profile:

Johnny received a stylish sweater from his grandparents. The occasion was his eleventh birthday. Since his gradnparents live far away and sent him the gift, he now writes the following letter of thanks:

Dear Grandma and Grandpa,
Thank you for the neat sweater you mailed me on my birthday. I don't have another sweater that is anything like it and many of my friends are envious of me.
It was a perfect match for the trousers that Mom and Dad gave me and I am planning to wear them both when I go skating in Nearby this week-end.
Thank you very much. It was a perfect gift.

Love,
John

This expression might be viewed as:

PRACTICAL X _____ NON-PRACTICAL

PERSONAL X _____ NON-PERSONAL

CREATIVE X _____ NON-CREATIVE

FICTION		X NON-FICTION
OBJECTIVE	X	NON-OBJECTIVE
THERAPEUTIC	X	NON-THERAPEUTIC
ORNATE	X	NON-ORNATE
FORMAL	X	NON-FORMAL
HUMOROUS		X NON-HUMOROUS
SHORT	X	NON-SHORT
POETIC		X NON-POETIC
DIRECT	X	NON-DIRECT
LITERAL	X	NON-LITERAL
OFFENSIVE		X NON-OFFENSIVE

(An "X" in the center may indicate neutrality or that both ends of the continuum fit.)

The ratings expressed on the profile are subjective and serve no particular purpose other than the description of or prescription for the content (and possibly the form) of the letter.

These factors might be helpful in a prescriptive sense if the profile is given first and the students asked to write so that their product fits the prescription. Example: Design a wedding invitation which fits the profile below:

PRACTICAL	X	NON-PRACTICAL
PERSONAL	X	NON-PERSONAL
CREATIVE	X	NON-CREATIVE
FICTION	X	NON-FICTION
OBJECTIVE	X	NON-OBJECTIVE
THERAPEUTIC	X	NON-THERAPEUTIC

ORNATE	X		NON-ORNATE
FORMAL	X		NON-FORMAL
HUMOROUS		X	NON-HUMOROUS
SHORT		X	NON-SHORT
POETIC	X		NON-POETIC
DIRECT		X	NON-DIRECT
LITERAL		X	NON-LITERAL
OFFENSIVE		X	NON-OFFENSIVE

By utilizing the factors and indicating the extent to which each factor is to be involved in the writing, the student is encouraged to (and given specific ideas for) varying the normal writing style (IF variation is what is prescribed). The teacher has provided a precise format for making this possible. Consider how different the end product might be if this were the prescription:

PRACTICAL		X	NON-PRACTICAL
PERSONAL	X		NON-PERSONAL
CREATIVE	X		NON-CREATIVE
FICTION	X		NON-FICTION
OBJECTIVE		X	NON-OBJECTIVE
THERAPEUTIC		X	NON-THERAPEUTIC
ORNATE		X	NON-ORNATE
FORMAL		X	NON-FORMAL
HUMOROUS	X		NON-HUMOROUS
SHORT	X		NON-SHORT
POETIC		X	NON-POETIC

DIRECT X NON-DIRECT

LITERAL X NON-LITERAL

OFFENSIVE X NON-OFFENSIVE

Students should be encouraged to make their own prescriptions prior to undertaking a writing task. It seems reasonable to think that consideration of such factors prior to writing would help direct the composer to some options available for the composition and thus aid the planning and production of the product.

These factors are not magic; they do not exhaust the profile possibilities. They are obviously not mutually exclusive nor non-overlapping; they should be expanded and modified by teacher and student. They could be the beginning of a precise way of describing the product and the process of expression or a precise way of prescribing or planning a writing task.

Now for a rerun. This has sought to encourage and challenge all to find ways to make writing fun, understood and accomplishable. Besides putting writing into a positive light it has been suggested that one needs to vary assignments according to the strands of: how much help is needed; the size of the composition group and the "size" of the assignment. Additional strategies include analyzing the writing tasks so that what is involved is understood and decisions can be made which will help the writer write successfully and thereby feel successful and be ready to write again.

True success will come only if you can tailor make assignments for each pupil. It is putting together the right part of each strand and strategy at the right time for EACH pupil that will promote successful writing experiences.

The self-concept feeds and is fed by self-evaluation. Understanding, patience and positive experiences will improve both the concept of and evaluation of self, others and writing products.

The challenge of the future is for you to help your pupils move into the future with self-confidence in their ability to write. So doing will improve the self concept AND provide a real basis for self evaluation because the task is understood.

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Marksberry, Mary L., Creative Learning and Teaching, Dodd, Mead and Co.: New York, 1970.

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